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ABSTRACT

Proactive teachers do not simply react to student behavior but use their thorough understanding of classroom communication to shape the pattern of class interaction. Proactive teachers are characterized by their recognition of the mutual influence of teachers and students in the learning process, their participation in social perspective taking, and their efforts to positively structure the affective climate of their classrooms. The value of their behavior is suggested by research indicating that (1) students also contribute to classroom input, a unidirectional model of teacher-to-student influence is inadequate in characterizing classroom interaction; (2) people with complex construct systems (serving as lenses for construing the nature of social events) are more flexible and adaptive and thus more successful in their communication; and (3) that teachers who are more accepting of students are evaluated more positively in the interpersonal domain. These proposed characterizations of proactive teachers have theoretical as well as practical utility, suggesting directions in future research and providing a model of successful classroom communication. (MM)

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A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM: THREE INTERRELATED PROPOSITIONS

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A PROACTIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM:
THREE INTERRELATED PROPOSITIONS

Nature of the Problem

In the last few years widespread concern about the quality of education in America, especially at the secondary level, has been expressed by a National Commission (1983), State Boards of Education (1983), Foundations (1983), councils (1983), and Educational Roundtable Reports (1983). This concern appears to be timely and legitimate. As the National Commission on Excellence in Education has noted: "our nation is at risk, ...and there is a rising tide of mediocrity in American education that is threatening our leadership in commerce, industry, science and technology, and our future as a nation and as a people" (pp.1-3). While this may seem a strong message, there is abundant evidence suggesting that nationally both the quality and effectiveness of schools and teachers have declined rather dramatically.

Among the most alarming statistics concerning student achievement are these:

*that about 13 percent of all 17-year-olds can be considered functionally illiterate; Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.

*Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests, despite recent gains, are still lower than before Sputnik.

*Nearly 40 percent of 17-year-olds cannot draw inferences from written material; only 20 percent can write a persuasive essay; only a thirt can solve a math problem that requires several steps.

*The College Board's SAT scores demonstrate an unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980; average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average math scores dropped nearly 40 points.

When we consider teacher performance, the National Commission's report provides more gloomy news:

*Nearly half of those hired to teach in the sciences last year were not fully certified to teach the subjects they were assigned.

*Not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; too many teachers are drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students.

These are just a few of the indicators of student and school decline. Thus, it is no wonder that so many universities find it necessary to earmark large funds for remedial classes.

While the reasons for our current plight in education can be traced to practically all segments of society and its institutions, some aspects of the issue are beyond educators control. Therefore, it is appropriate that we focus only on those aspects of the problem that are of direct concern and control by educators: teacher attitudes and teacher training. If we desire "excellence" in education we need to start with better teachers and better teacher training. But what sorts of effective teaching and teacher training are we talking about? The National Commission report suggests that teacher preparation curriculum is "weighted too heavily with courses in 'educational methods' at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught" (p.22). Other critics charge that teacher training programs "do not give students a realistic set of expectations about the career they are entering, do not provide the links between pedagogical research and actual practice, and do not teach them the coping skills that teachers, buffeted by multiple vested interests and societal changes, must acquire if they are to remain successful" (Improving, p.12).

Centrality of Communication to the Teaching-Learning Process

The issues and concerns about quality teaching are many and will continue to be debated for some time. It is our concern, however, that as the debate continues, and as recommendations for improved teacher training and effectiveness are made, that the significant role of communication in the teaching-learning process not be overlooked or viewed as peripheral. Specifically, it is our contention that a fundamental prerequisite to effective teaching is to have a working knowledge of the communication process and teacher-learner communicative behaviors. We further contend that having a solid grounding in the nature, importance and effects of classroom

communication and interaction should result in teaching behavior which is proactive (Brophy & Good, 1974). By proactive teaching we mean that a teacher fully understands and is aware of the specific ways in which they attempt to influence and are influenced by classroom behavior. The proactive teacher is consciously and strategically able to shape the pattern of classroom interaction and not merely react to differential student behavior and be in effect conditioned by such behavior. The ability to shape the pattern of classroom interaction proactively depends upon effective communication behavior.

Another fundamental principle of the teaching-learning process is that the classroom is a social system where both task/content as well as relational aspects of interaction are taking place simultaneously (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). This is not a new idea in our field, but as Darnell (1978) has noted, there is "no evidence that the transactional/relational perspective has taken hold in the teaching-learning arena." For example, in a recently published volume on research in college teaching almost no attention is given to the affective dimensions of the teaching-learning process (Ellner & Barnes, 1983). In short, teaching and learning are still viewed as dichotomous functions which are somehow separate from the interdependence of all the participating elements in the learning process. If communication is a central feature in the life of what goes on in the classroom, then all aspects of the teaching-learning process need to be viewed as interdependent with this communicative transaction. We are not just teaching content, or measuring performance on achievement tests, or asking only content questions; rather, we are also promoting inducement and motivation for learning, we are attempting to establish trust, understanding, respect for ideas as well as the way ideas are expressed and a whole range of affective experiences which are at the "center of learning" (Darnell, 1978, p.277).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explicate a perspective on proactive teaching. Our concern is to outline characteristics that have a great deal to do with how instructional content is processed in the classroom. The issues addresssed in this paper are not

exhaustive nor will the suggestions cure the ills of the educational status quo. However, the paper does outline communication issues that are related to the effective management of the instructional context. Three major propositions characterize our position.

Proposition I. Proactive teaching depends upon an understanding of the mutual influence of teachers and students in the learning process.

This first proposition suggests that it is important for teachers to focus on the reciprocal nature of classroom interaction. As noted above, if communication is viewed from a transactional perspective where the interdependence of the participating elements are emphasized, this should also be the model for the teaching-learning process as well. Teaching is not unidirectional and linear. Students do not play mainly a reactive role in the classroom. Research on classroom interaction conducted by Fiedler (1975) indicates that classroom events are at least partially determined by the students as well as the teacher, and that "students' perceptions of classroom climate are related to student inputs as well as teacher inputs"(p.742). A unidirectional model of teacher-to-student influence is an inadequate way to characterize the teacher-learner pattern of interaction.

In a related study by McCroskey & Richmond (1983) on teacher and student perceptions of power in the classroom, it is suggested that teachers and students each have very different perceptions of how power is utilized. The results indicate that teachers and students may not share the same perceptions or judgments about how the use of power in the classroom should or should not be used. The import of this study is that teachers ought to carefully assess the perceptions students hold about classroom power, climate, or other relevant issues and not assume they know what students are thinking. Again, classroom interaction and influence is not orchestrated exclusively by the instructor; rather, there are multidirectional communication influences at work which effect over time the unfolding of the learning process.

Proposition II. Proactive teaching requires the instructor to participate in Social Perspective Taking.

A good deal of research in communication asserts that effective communication is related to social perspective taking. As a process,

Perspective taking involves an individual's ability to construe and maintain another's point of view. In accomplishing this, individuals draw upon a system of personal constructs. According to Kelly (1955), constructs serve as lenses for construing the nature of social events. These constructs are directly related to behavioral choice. The number and quality of an individuals constructs serve as the foundation for the kind of communication strategy implemented in any given situation.

In testing this notion, Hale and Delia (1976) hypothesized that the more complex an individual's system of personal constructs (i.e., the more constructs a person has), the better they should be at perspective taking. Subjects were asked to complete a social perspective taking task and were assessed in terms of their cognitive complexity (RCQ). The results pointed to a strong relationship between cognitive complexity and social perspective taking. Thus, the more constructs available to a person the more they will take the perspective of another.

Applegate (1980) extended many of the notions articulated by Hale and Delia (1976) into the classroom context. He examined teachers' ability to recognize and adapt to students interpersonal and regulative communication.

In developing the study, Applegate attempted to integrate Basil Bernstein's (1975) notion of "elaborated" and "restricted" codes into a constructivistic philosophy. The author hypothesized that teachers with a more abstract or developed construct system will be more adaptive with students in interpersonal and regulative contexts. Teachers were assessed in terms of construct abstractness and role bound construing. Next, they were then required to place themselves in five hypothetical communication situations, three regulative and two interpersonal. The author found that teachers who have developed more abstract interpersonal construct systems were better at construing adaptive personal appeals.

The results of studies by Applegate (1980), and Hale and Delia (1976) link social cognition with communication effectiveness. That is, individuals with rather complex construct systems are more flexible and adaptive in their communication. Based on this evidence we might be led to conclude that only high complex individuals should

be instructors. This is neither practical or theoretically justifiable. Rather, our argument is for maximization. We will assume that most individuals who are teaching are fairly cognitively complex (although many of us may argue with this observation since we have all had experiences with insensitive nerds who are in the classroom), and can learn to maximize the construct systems they have at their disposal. Cegala (1981) addresses this issue when he states:

> ...Flavell and others have suggested that it is erroneous to assume that even adults necessarily demonstrate fundamental communication behaviors that are typically thought to be acquired during earlier stages of development (p.121).

Our interpretation of this is that in many cases individuals do not utilize the repertoires at their disposal, in this case cognitive complexity. Thus, teachers can be taught to use their construct systems more efficiently which in turn will positively influence perspective taking and communication in the classroom.

Proposition III. Proactive teaching also involves perspective taking within the affective domain. That is, teachers who are proactive attempt to positively structure the affective climate of the classroom.

In the last few years a great deal of research has pointed to the role that teacher affect plays in the classroom. The literature in this area suggests that effective teaching is related to communication that is more interpersonal than role bound.

In explicating the effect of affect, several interpersonal behaviors have been examined. For example, Anderson (1979) found that immediacy (nonverbal behavior communicating warmth and support) to be related to teaching effectiveness and affective learning. Scott and Nussbaum (1981) reported that instructor honesty in self-disclosure, perceived communication competence and perceived adeptness in verbal and nonverbal communication were predictive of student judgments of teaching effectiveness. Arthur and Powell (1983) found that measures of teacher affect to be related to teaching effectiveness at two times in a semester. Norton (1977), concluded that effective teachers tend to be (1) relaxed, (2) not dominant, (3) friendly and (4) precise in communication

Taken as a whole the studies above can be conceptualized in terms of acdeptance-rejection. That is, teachers who are evaluated

Positively in the interpersonal domain are perceived to be accepting and confirm students as individuals, whereas teachers who do not are perceived as rejecting.

Since acceptance appears to have an important role in the classroom, teachers ought be encouraged to structure its impact. We are not suggesting that a teacher operationalize acceptance in terms of a non-directive teaching style, but understand that any teaching style has affective impact. Thus, a highly directive teacher can be highly affective too.

Several instruments can be used to help teachers develop a sense of their accepting behaviors. Andersen (1979) developed a measure of nonverbal immediacy which describes behaviors which reflect how the teacher is perceived in terms of warmth and support (this instrument is a Behavioral Indicants of Immediacy Scale [BII] which consists of a 15 item Likert type instrument). McLaughlin, Ellison, and Erickson (1980), have developed a complementary instrument which provides a verbal assessment of acceptance. The Index of Teachers' Affective Communication [ITAC] consists of fourteen seven point items which call for students to evaluate the degree to which certain utterances sound like their instructor. For example, one item states: Teacher Behavior: Proscribes certain behaviors: "That's not allowed here." The higher the score the less accepting the teacher. Both the BII and the ITAC can provide a good picture of how accepting or rejecting the teacher is in the classroom. Once the teacher learns how he/she is being perceived he/she can take strides toward remediation and ultimately proactivity.

To summarize this third proposition, we are suggesting that for the teacher to understand how a behavior is being perceived requires perspective taking. While many individual's are notoriously poor at judging how they are being perceived, we do believe that individuals are capable of increasing this capacity. Taken together then, training in perspective taking and the management of accepting behaviors will increase the teachers' communication ability in the classroom.

Conclusions/Implications

In conclusion, the three propositions explicated in this paper are interrelated. In addition, the propositions have theoretical

as well as practical utility. At the theoretical level the propositions provide directions for future research. For example, additional research needs to examine the nature of how teachers and students mutually influence one another. An additional research question might consider what affective behaviors are most central to the teaching-learning process. A third area would investigate the various strategies that might be used by teachers to promote the development of their perspective taking ability in the classroom.

The practical utility of the perspective offered in this paper is suggestive of ways to improve teacher training. For example, teachers can have student's evaluate their affective behaviors using instruments like those identified above (the BII & ITAC). Such an assessment can provide the teacher with valuable insights on how they are perceived by students. A second practical application can be seen in the development of teacher training workshops. Such workshops would aid teachers in the exploration of how they construe the salient dimensions of the instructional/communicative process.

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